

---

# Exploratory Action Research in Language Teacher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

Dilafruz Sarimsakova

PhD, Associate Professor, Namangan State University

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/jtp.v2i4.1884>

\*Correspondence: Dilafruz Sarimsakova

Email: [d.sarimsakova@mail.ru](mailto:d.sarimsakova@mail.ru)

Received: 04-04-2025

Accepted: 13-05-2025

Published: 26-06-2025



**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract:** This article explores the role of Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in language teacher education, focusing on both its potential and the barriers to its effective implementation. EAR offers student teachers an opportunity to engage in classroom-based inquiry, enhancing their professional development through reflective teaching and systematic research. Drawing from theoretical frameworks and practical applications, this article discusses how EAR strengthens inquiry skills, connects theory with practice, fosters collaboration, and supports context-sensitive teaching. It also outlines the main challenges such as time constraints, limited research experience, and institutional barriers. Recommendations are provided for successfully integrating EAR into teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** Exploratory Action Research, Language Teacher Education, Reflective Practice, Teacher Inquiry, Professional Development

---

## Introduction

Over the last decades, considerable attention in literature has grown around teacher research (TR) in both language teaching and general education (Borg, 2013; Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). If we look at the history of TR in general education, Kurt Lewin is widely acknowledged as the originator of action research in the 1940s. Later, Lawrence Stenhouse developed theoretical foundations and applications of TR in the 1970s (Burns, 1999).

In language teaching, early TR studies were conducted by Dick Allwright and Kathleen Bailey (1991), and David Nunan (1989), while Anne Burns (1999) advanced action research as a model of TR (cited in Anderson, 2024). More recently, Smith and Rebolledo (2018) introduced Exploratory Action Research (EAR) as a refined form of TR aimed at improving classroom practices and empowering teachers for ongoing professional development.

## Methodology

Numerous studies have emphasized the importance and benefits of TR as a means for teachers to investigate and improve their own practices. Borg & Sanchez (2015) define

TR as a methodologically-flexible activity carried out by teachers—individually or collaboratively—to achieve real-world impact and make their findings publicly accessible. According to Gilliland (2018) and Fecho (2000), TR is a systematic self-study by teachers in their own classrooms, involving critical reflection and inquiry into their practices and student learning. Grimmett (1996) argues that TR helps teachers change their practice, feel more professional, and engage with teaching in a new way. Edge (2001) states that TR enables teachers to problematize everyday practices, identify researchable classroom issues, and understand their findings through reflection. Herr (1999) notes that TR can address persistent school-level problems. Smith & Rebolledo (2018) describe TR as a teacher-led research process, often supported by mentors or experienced educators who act as facilitators.

Overall, TR allows teachers to become more effective by contributing to improved teaching practices. It provides a powerful means of understanding themselves, their classrooms, and their students, thereby extending best practices in education.

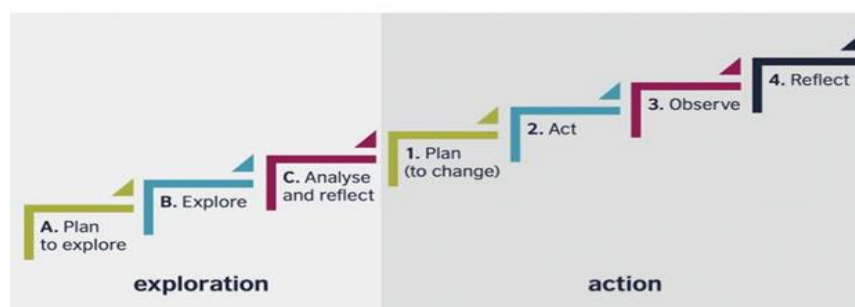
Exploratory Action Research (EAR), a specific and practical strand of TR, has emerged as a transformative methodological approach in teacher education, particularly in the field of language teaching. EAR encourages teachers to engage in systematic inquiry into their own classrooms, combining the processes of exploration (identifying challenges) and action (testing pedagogical solutions) (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). Unlike traditional academic research, EAR is practitioner-led and focuses on contextualized, classroom-based inquiry. In the evolving landscape of language education, where reflective teaching and evidence-based practices are becoming increasingly essential, EAR presents a promising path for professional development.

## Result and Discussion

### What is Exploratory Action Research?

EAR is a type of classroom-based research that begins with an exploration of a problem or issue that teachers want to investigate. EAR typically involves mentorship, where experienced educators guide novice teachers through the research process. It is one of several approaches to teacher-led research but stands out for its practical orientation and emphasis on reflective teaching.

The stages of Exploratory Action Research



Source: Smith, R. & Rebolledo, P. (2018). *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*. London: British Council

**Figure 1.** The Stages of Exploratory Action Research

EAR is structured in a seven-step process:

- a. Plan to Explore: Teachers reflect on their teaching and learner needs to identify an area of focus. They then formulate exploratory questions and plan how to collect data.
- b. Explore: Data are collected using carefully planned tools such as surveys, focus group discussions, or observations, based on the questions posed.
- c. Analyse and Reflect: Teachers examine the data and seek answers to their exploratory questions.
  1. Plan Change: Based on their findings, teachers design an intervention strategy and plan how to evaluate its effects.
  2. Act: The planned intervention is implemented in the classroom.
  3. Observe: During and after the intervention, further data are collected to assess the outcomes.
  4. Reflect: The effects of the change are analyzed, and further actions may be considered based on findings.

This process is divided into two major stages:

**Stage 1 – Exploration:** The goal is to deeply understand the current situation. For instance, a teacher might investigate how learners respond to reading materials before introducing any changes, ensuring interventions are rooted in classroom realities.

**Stage 2 – Action:** In this phase, changes based on collected data are implemented and evaluated. The key question shifts from "What is happening?" to "What is the effect of my changes?" Evaluation is ongoing and focuses on the impact and implications of the intervention.

As language classrooms are dynamic, interactive spaces where context-sensitive approaches are vital. EAR suits these environments because it allows teachers to adapt strategies to learners' needs based on direct observation and reflection (Burns, 2010). EAR aligns well with the goals of language teacher education, which include fostering inquiry, critical thinking, and adaptability. It serves as a practical bridge between pedagogical theory and the nuanced realities of language instruction (Farrell, 2015).

### **Opportunities of EAR in Language Teacher Education**

EAR cultivates a habit of systematic reflection by encouraging teachers to question and examine their own instructional practices. Reflection becomes more structured and evidence-informed, moving beyond intuition. For instance, a pre-service teacher may notice a lack of engagement during reading sessions. Through EAR, the teacher can collect learner feedback, identify that the texts are culturally irrelevant, and adapt materials accordingly. This aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection-in-action," where the teacher thinks critically during the teaching process, not just after the fact.

Language teacher education often faces the challenge of making abstract pedagogical theories meaningful to student teachers. EAR provides a concrete framework where theory informs practice, and practice tests theory. For example, if a teacher is learning about task-based language teaching (TBLT), EAR allows them to design, implement, and evaluate a

task in their own class, thus directly linking academic content with classroom realities (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2010).

EAR positions teachers as researchers, giving them a sense of agency over their own professional development. Rather than passively adopting external methods, student teachers create personalized solutions to their classroom challenges. This autonomy is especially valuable in language teaching, where one-size-fits-all solutions rarely apply due to learner diversity and contextual variation (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).

Through EAR, student teachers acquire essential research skills: designing exploratory questions, conducting focus group discussions, interpreting learner feedback, and evaluating interventions. These are transferable skills that support lifelong inquiry and continuous improvement. Such competence is crucial for navigating the complexities of contemporary classrooms and for engaging in evidence-informed decision-making (Burns, 2010; Zeichner, 2009).

Collaboration is an integral part of EAR, often involving shared inquiry and group reflection. Student teachers may jointly plan explorations, compare data, and discuss findings. This peer learning deepens understanding, fosters a supportive learning environment, and promotes critical dialogue. For instance, one teacher's insights about learner motivation can inspire others to investigate similar concerns, creating a ripple effect of professional growth (Farrell, 2015).

Unlike top-down professional development models, EAR grows from teachers' direct engagement with their teaching environment. This context sensitivity makes it particularly suited to language teaching, where classrooms vary widely in linguistic and cultural composition. Changes derived from EAR are more relevant, sustainable, and likely to lead to genuine transformation (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).

EAR fosters an attitude of continuous inquiry and improvement, laying the foundation for lifelong professional learning. Teachers trained in EAR are more likely to view classroom challenges as opportunities for exploration rather than obstacles. This mindset is vital in a fast-changing educational landscape, where adaptability and innovation are key.

### **Challenges of Implementing EAR**

Student teachers and even in-service teachers often struggle to find time for systematic inquiry amidst their teaching duties. Conducting observations, collecting data, and writing reports require time and energy that are often in short supply (Zeichner, 2009). Many student teachers lack prior experience in research methodology, making tasks like designing data collection tools or analyzing qualitative data daunting. Without adequate training, they may feel overwhelmed (Borg, 2013). EAR thrives in environments that encourage teacher inquiry. Unfortunately, some institutions do not provide sufficient mentoring, resources, or validation for teacher-led research. This limits the impact of EAR initiatives (Farrell, 2015). Moreover, writing research reports and presenting findings can be challenging for novice researchers. Many student teachers are unfamiliar with academic writing conventions and data interpretation, which can reduce the effectiveness of their

work (Burns, 2010). Some teachers may view EAR as an additional burden rather than an opportunity for growth. Overcoming resistance requires cultural shifts within institutions and teacher education programs to value reflective inquiry (Schön, 1983).

### **Implications for Teacher Education Programs**

To maximize the impact of Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in language teacher education and minimize its barriers, it is essential to embed EAR within the teacher education curriculum as a core component rather than as an optional activity. Structured research training sessions focusing on practical data collection methods, such as focus group discussions and classroom observations, can help build student teachers' confidence and research competence. Establishing strong mentorship programs, where experienced educators guide novice researchers through each stage of the EAR cycle, significantly reduces confusion and promotes sustained engagement. Institutions should foster a culture of inquiry by encouraging collaborative reflection through peer dialogue, group analysis, and reflective journaling. Providing platforms for dissemination—such as student-led conferences, blogs, or digital portfolios—not only motivates teachers to take ownership of their learning but also validates their efforts. Crucially, administrative support in terms of manageable workloads, allocated time for research activities, and access to resources can address logistical constraints. By integrating these strategies, teacher education programs can create an environment where EAR flourishes as a sustainable and impactful practice.

### **Conclusion**

Exploratory Action Research (EAR) holds transformative potential for language teacher education by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical classroom realities. It empowers future educators to become critical inquirers, reflective practitioners, and agents of change within their own teaching contexts. Through EAR, student teachers not only enhance their research skills but also develop a deeper understanding of their learners, refine their pedagogical approaches, and cultivate a professional mindset grounded in evidence and reflection.

Despite its numerous benefits, the effective implementation of EAR faces notable challenges, including time constraints, limited research experience, and insufficient institutional support. These barriers can hinder the sustainability and scalability of EAR unless they are systematically addressed. However, when integrated thoughtfully into teacher education curricula—with adequate scaffolding, mentorship, and institutional backing—EAR becomes a powerful driver of professional development.

In an era where language education demands adaptability, learner-centeredness, and continuous improvement, EAR offers a practical and empowering pathway for teacher growth. By fostering a culture of inquiry and collaboration, educational institutions can prepare a new generation of language teachers who are not only skilled practitioners but also lifelong learners and reflective researchers.

## References

- Anderson, J. (2024). *Teacher Research*. University of Warwick, Applied Linguistics, Coventry, UK.
- Arabahmadi, S. (2023). Validation of an Ecological Model of Teacher Agency for Iranian EFL Student Teachers. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature*, 11(1), 161-184, ISSN 2820-8986, <https://doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2023.28234.1510>
- Borg, S. (2013). *Teacher research in language teaching: A critical analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Borg, S., & Sanchez, H. (Eds.). (2015). *International perspectives on teacher research*. Springer.
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge.
- Castillo, K.A.P. (2024). Application of Web 2.0 to Reduce Failure in English. *Revista Electronica De Investigacion Educativa*, 26, ISSN 1607-4041, <https://doi.org/10.24320/redie.2024.26.e05.6038>
- Celebi, E. (2022). Transformative Experiences of EFL Lecturers' Professional Identity in Online Education. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 11(2), 795-804, ISSN 2165-8714, <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.11.2.795>
- Edge, J. (2001). *Attitude and access: Building a new teaching/learning community in TESOL*. Language Teacher Research in Action.
- Esteve-Faubel, J.M. (2024). Use of animated stories to improve music education practices of trainee primary school teachers in Spain. *British Journal of Music Education*, 41(1), 87-102, ISSN 0265-0517, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051723000244>
- Farrell, T.S.C. (2015). *Reflective practice in ESL teacher development groups: From practices to principles*. Palgrave
- Fecho, B. (2000). Critical inquiries into language in an urban classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 34(3), 368–395.
- Gilliland, B. (2018). Teacher research during an international practicum. *ELT Journal*, 72(3). <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx054>

- Grimmett, P. P. (1996). The struggles of teacher research in a context of education reform: Implications for instructional supervision. *Journal of Curriculum & Supervision*, 12(1), 37–65.
- Herr, K. (1999). Unearthing the unspeakable: When teacher research and political agendas collide. *Language Arts*, 77(1), 10–15.
- Hsiao, C.C. (2023). Design of a professional learning community scale for elementary school teacher participation. *Bulletin of Educational Psychology*, 54(3), 583-608, ISSN 1011-5714, [https://doi.org/10.6251/BEP.202303\\_54\(3\).0004](https://doi.org/10.6251/BEP.202303_54(3).0004)
- Kao, Y.T. (2022). Understanding and addressing the challenges of teaching an online CLIL course: a teacher education study. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(2), 656-675, ISSN 1367-0050, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1713723>
- Lindberg, M. (2025). Disciplinary literacy and verbal language in physical education. *Sport Education and Society*, 30(3), 368-382, ISSN 1357-3322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2318394>
- Reinke, H. (2022). Supporting Young Immigrants in Their Transition From School to Work? A Staff Perspective on Challenges of Vocational Integration Classes. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 9(1), 92-119, ISSN 2197-8638, <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.9.1.5>
- Santiago-Garabieta, M. (2023). Inclusion of L2 (Basque) learners in Dialogic Literary Gatherings in a linguistically diverse context. *Language Teaching Research*, 27(6), 1532-1551, ISSN 1362-1688, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821994142>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. Basic Books.
- Slimani-Rolls, A. (2024). Introduction to the special issue: Challenges and practices to advance sustainable and inclusive practitioner research. *Language Teaching Research*, ISSN 1362-1688, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241293155>
- Smith, R., & Rebolledo, P. (2018). *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*. British Council.
- Yang, C. (2023). Predicting student and instructor e-readiness and promoting e-learning success in online EFL class during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case from China. *Plos One*, 18(5), ISSN 1932-6203, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284334>
- Zare, J. (2024). Task engagement in second language acquisition: a questionnaire development and validation study. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, ISSN 0143-4632, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2306166>

Zeichner, K. (2009). *Teacher education and the struggle for social justice*. Routledge.